

## CHAPTER TWELVE

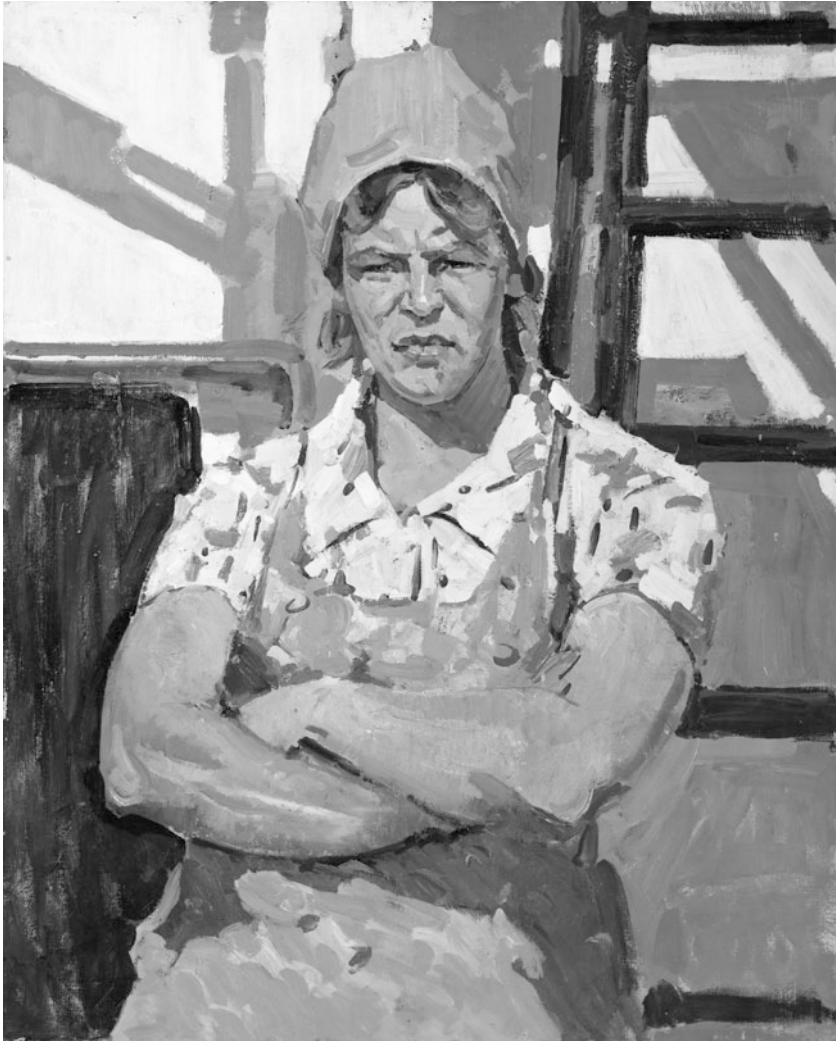
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### *Red Venus: Alexandra Kollontai's Red Love and Women in Soviet Art*

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#### Working Woman

Alexandra Kollontai's (1872–1952) responsibilities as People's Commissar of Social Welfare (immediately following the 1917 Revolution) included the care of mothers, infants, and orphans. One of her projects envisaged setting up free day care centers and maternity homes, but her efforts were met with hostility. Kollontai's Prenatal Care Palace, with day care and other services for young mothers, was burnt down. She resigned from her position in March 1918, disagreeing with the direction the government was taking. As she explained in *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, "I resigned from my post as People's Commissar on the ground of total disagreement with the current policy. Little by little I was also relieved of all my other tasks."<sup>1</sup> Kollontai publicly objected to the growing dictatorship of the Party and the diminishing importance of Workers' Councils ("Soviets" in Russian), a concern that she voiced during the debate over the Workers' Opposition.



**Figure 12.1** Yuri I. Bosko. *A Working Woman*, 1960s. Oil on canvas 39 1/4 x 31 1/8 in.

*Yuri Bosko's portrait of a woman worker underscores her physical strength and no-nonsense attitude. But why is she disgruntled? In the 1960s, as the Soviet nation cautiously explored the liberating effects of Nikita Khrushchev's thaw, Soviet women were increasingly overwhelmed with conflicting demands of family and factory. Postwar Soviet Union boasted the world's highest percentage of women in the workforce. The Soviet economy's insatiable appetite for labor drew women into industry in ever increasing numbers. Postwar Soviet psychologists bemoaned the "masculinization" of Soviet women, and sociologists pondered the demographic effects of low birth rates. Meanwhile, women continued juggling family and work in an economy of persistent shortages and scarce commodities.*

### **A Revolution for Women**

From its inception in 1917, Soviet Russia instituted full political and civil equality for its citizens, overturning the long history of women's exclusion. Early Soviet laws envisioned a position for women in society that was unrivalled anywhere in the world, granting them the right to vote and full access to education and employment.

In the name of women's liberation, the 1918 Family Code abolished church marriage and granted married women full control over their property and earnings. Difficult to obtain in tsarist times, divorce became easily accessible. According to the 1926 revision of the code, anyone could get a divorce at a local registration office without the consent of the other spouse. In a particularly radical move, abortion was legalized in 1920.

Riddled with internal contradictions, the Soviet program of women's emancipation was largely based on the utopian hope that women's domestic responsibilities would be transferred to socialized state-funded services. Alexandra Kollontai wrote, "Instead of the conjugal slavery of the past, communist society offers women and men a free union which is strong in the comradeship which inspired it...—this so-called indissoluble marriage which at bottom was merely a fraud—has given place to the free and honest union of men and women who are lovers and comrades...just as the narrow and exclusive affection of the mother for her own children must expand until it extends to all the children of the great, proletarian family, the indissoluble marriage based on the servitude of women is replaced by a free union of two equal members of the workers' state who are united by love and mutual respect. In place of the individual and egotistic family, a great universal family of workers will develop.<sup>2</sup> As commissar of welfare



**Figure 12.2** Aleksei P. Tkachev and Sergei P. Tkachev. *On the Eve of the October Holiday*, 1970–75. Oil on canvas 69 1/4 x 55 7/8 in.

in the first Soviet government, Kollontai was a passionate advocate for women's rights. Between 1920 and 1922, she was the head of the Women's Section (Zhenotdel), a unique state-funded organization with a feminist agenda that tackled female unemployment, protection of motherhood, prostitution, and childcare among other issues.

*In the painting by Aleksei and Sergei Tkachev, a woman wearing a red scarf irons a red banner, in preparation for the celebration of the October Revolution Day. In the 1920s, red scarves were worn as a badge of office by the activists of the Women's Section—the famous Zhenotdels. Zhenotdels were departments within the ruling Communist Party that included both staff and elected members, known as delegates. Elected from the ranks of women workers at factories and other organizations, Zhenotdel delegates were political representatives of the country's working women. The politicians in red scarves visited trade unions, schools, city councils, factories, stores, hospitals, and so on. Endowed with political power, they could monitor the work of these organizations and thus contribute to the betterment of Soviet women's lives. The Zhenotdels were closed in 1930 by the order of Josef Stalin.*

If, in her *Autobiography*, Alexandra Kollontai presents a political reason for her resignation from the post of People's Commissar, in her 1923 novel *Vasilisa Malygina* (titled *Red Love* in the 1927 US edition), she outlines her experience through an emotional lens.<sup>3</sup> In her evocative analysis of postrevolutionary romance, Kollontai witnessed the emergence of a new binary opposition (or rather the reversal of a previous dichotomy)—the socially active independent woman, seen as progressive and advanced, was opposed to the overly feminine woman. In a radical move, early Soviet feminism undertook to overturn the traditional binary of the meek angel of the house and self-assertive, independent woman. The Soviet state collapsed the binary expecting the fully employed woman worker to also be the domestic angel of the socialist household.

### Red Venus

*Like Giorgione's Sleeping Venus, Geli Korzhhev's Marusya is asleep, her arms stretched behind her head. Contrary to the enchanted melancholy of the Renaissance goddess of love in Giorgione's famous painting, the Soviet Venus is in a deep slumber after a hard day's work; her worn-out, but still impressive body is beat.*

Female nudes are often painted for the purpose of visual pleasure—often for the male gaze. Arrangements of colors and shapes, nudes tell a story of sensuousness and beauty. However, Korzhev's portrayal is more than that. His *Red Venus* is a Soviet worker who shovels heaps of asphalt or paints walls all day long. In the evening, she returns home to wash dust from her tired body, as the water in the tub turns cold, and then falls asleep. Similar to male nudes that often embody public ideals and values, Marusya's tough muscular body is elevated beyond sensuality to a symbolic station. This body that had given birth and worked hard is the pictogram of quintessential Sovietness—the nation's body. To be Soviet for Korzhev is to be this tired worker's body, beyond ideological slogans and directives.

Korzhev's nude is based on his memories of living in a communal apartment where one of the neighbors was a factory worker who always wore a red headscarf and heavy boots when she went off to work.

Vasilisa, Kollontai's heroine in *Vasilisa Malygina or Red Love*, is freed from stereotypical notions about her sex. Shedding a feminine persona, she welcomes the freedom granted to women by the new Soviet state. In her earlier work *New Woman*, Alexandra Kollontai outlined her blueprint for a liberated female: "Life in the last decades, under the heavy hammer blows of vital necessity, has forged a woman with a new psychological sense, new needs, and new temper."<sup>4</sup> These are not the "'nice' girls whose romance culminates in a highly successful marriage, they are not wives who suffer from the infidelities of their husbands, or who themselves have committed adultery." Instead they are "heroines with independent demands on life...who protest against the universal servitude of woman in the State, the family, society."<sup>5</sup> So, when the new woman is busy with work, nothing else exists, certainly not love. In fact, her sexual emancipation is to be understood as emancipation from sexuality.



**Figure 12.3** Geli M. Korzhev (1925–2012), *Marusya*, 1983–89. Oil on canvas 37 3/4 x 89 1/4 in.

In *Red Love*, the heroine's love is painted in comradely tones; it is not the passionate love that seeks to please only itself. Kollontai's Vasilisa is first and foremost a fighter for the common good. Volodya, her husband, commenting on her underwear, says it reminds him of the hair shirts worn by Christian ascetics for the mortification of the flesh. "Everything for the revolution," Vasilisa replies. Asceticism will become a proper character trait to be instilled in Soviet women. The rhetoric of motherhood will also be widely exploited by the new Soviet ideology. The libidinal aggressiveness of individuals will be tamed and replaced by the eroticized rhetoric of passionate love for the Communist fatherland. In the decades following the publication of *Love of Worker Bees*, the Vasilisa type would become a requirement, an ideological cliché. The woman worker would be proclaimed the ideal female type. Soviet economic structures would be dominated by heavy industry, pushing the production of consumer goods and appliances to the margins.

### Soviet Women: Facts and Figures

*Soviet Russia was the first country in history to proclaim full equality of its citizens under the law. In the 1950s, women were prominent in all areas of the Soviet economy. They comprised more than 50 percent of all college-educated specialists, more than sixty percent of college instructors, economists and statisticians, more than 70 percent of medical doctors, and over 90 percent of all medical workers. Women were scientists, pilots, captains of ocean liners, heads of industrial enterprises, and astronauts. Compared to prerevolutionary years, women's life expectancy doubled, and child mortality was reduced by 90 percent. Women enjoyed substantial social benefits such as a fully paid 112-day maternity leave and retirement at the age of 55.*

*Soviet achievements in the realm of women's emancipation were apparent. However, behind the dazzling official reports, the realities of ordinary women's lives remained invisible. Even the underground dissident and nonconformist movements of the late Soviet epoch did not include women's issues into their agendas.*

*Healthcare, where women were predominant, was one of the most poorly paid sectors of Soviet economy. In 1964, the average monthly pay of a healthcare worker was 65 rubles, while it was 106 rubles in the male-dominated heavy industries. Women were prominent in mid-level managerial positions comprising almost half of store managers and heads of trading organizations, but they were under-represented or absent in the highest echelons of power. In 1966, the Central Committee of the Communist Party numbered 195 members, only four of whom were women. None of the 11-member Politburo and eight candidates to the Politburo were women.*





**Figure 12.4** Vladimir I. Nekrasov, *Milkmaids*, 1990. Oil on canvas 48 x 66 in.

Much like herself, Kollontai's heroine is a prominent member of the Party. She works for the people, organizing them the way she deems fit, rebuilding the world around her according to her ideas and viewpoints. This power provides satisfaction, not just the power of decision-making but also the ability to be in control of one's own life and to mold it independently of another's will.

Yet even as an independent working woman is foregrounded, Kollontai's novel is haunted by a disturbing nostalgic presence of the other, feminine woman, the one who is preoccupied with clothes, cosmetics, and dreams of marriage, the one who provokes male desire by her desire to please, her weakness, and dependence; in other words, the type of woman who is everything Vasilisa is not—Nina, Volodya's lover. In a letter to Volodya, Nina writes, "I can't live without you...there is nothing, nothing in the whole world better or more important than a love like ours...I'll do anything you say...I belong to you, from my lips to my toes." She adds a postscript: "I am so happy, I found that powder I was looking for, L'Origan Coty!"<sup>6</sup>

Nina lurks within the novel's pages. Vasilisa sees her only once but pays attention to her brightly painted red lips, conspicuous under her broad-



brimmed fashionable hat. The feminine woman is presented as a surface, without interiority, all clothes and makeup. Volodya chooses Nina (though not without inner struggle and torment). But even if the feminine woman snatches the prize in the form of the man; the final word, the future, is reserved for Vasilisa. At the end of the novel, both women are pregnant—Nina has an abortion because she is not yet married to Volodya and does not want to have a baby out of wedlock; while Vasilisa welcomes single motherhood, leaving her husband without letting him know she is pregnant. She will bring up her baby as a communist child, with the help of the collective of women that she is now, more than ever, determined to build.

Nina departs Kollontai's narrative in tears, crying. And indeed the feminine woman continued lamenting her fate throughout the Soviet era, criticized and mocked in public media, labeled bourgeois and shallow, a social parasite, lacking the means to maintain her feminine appearance through make up and clothes that were chronically absent from Soviet stores. Official art favored physically strong, somewhat androgynous female models. When post-Stalinist Soviet art and literature began to renegotiate the public-private divide, trying to push the state's ideological presence out of the private sphere, the question "Where is the true woman?" resurfaced, implying that the true woman might have been lost in the excitement of creating the New Woman. During Perestroika (the late 1980s), femininity reared its pretty head. When Mikhail Gorbachev suggested that women should be moved back to the kitchen some embarked on a search of what Alice Walker called, "our mother's gardens," retracing our steps to early Soviet feminist thinkers and asking the question: Who stole our feminism?

### **Back to the Future**

*In Korzhev's intriguing work, the Soviet Eve looks hesitantly at the serpent. Adam, a crippled alcoholic, patiently awaits her judgment. What is the serpent's offer? The perilous lure of alcohol is often dubbed "the green serpent" in Russian. Is Eve then tempted by the serpent to indulge her husband and let him have another bottle? He has already drunk away his disability pension, and the family's remaining money is in his wife's bag. But on another level—and Korzhev's works are always layered with meaning—her temptation is much weightier. Does she want, or indeed can she continue to oblige? Through seventy Soviet years, the woman has carried the burden of Soviet history, Soviet family, and Soviet man.*

*Told to move mountains, she did. Even before the advent of the Soviet rule, the Russian woman was extolled for her strength rather than her femininity. In his Diary of a Writer, Feodor Dostoevsky called the Russian woman a “self-renouncing martyr for the Russian Man,” saying: “In her resides our only great hope, one of the pledges of our survival.”*<sup>7</sup>

*Like the biblical foremother, Korzhev’s Eve holds the future of the nation in her hands. Will she continue to be patient and obligingly move mountains or will she take a stand? With downcast eyes, Adam waits, becoming the feminized embodiment of post-Soviet Russia, traditionally seen as a female. Drunk, crippled, weak, Russia passively waits for the woman to make her decision.*



**Figure 12.5** Geli M. Korzhev. *Adam and Eve*, 1988. Oil on canvas 38 3/4 x 39 in.

### Notes

1. Alexandra Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 40.
2. Alexandra Kollontai, "Communism and the Family," in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. Alix Holt (London: Allison & Busby, 1977). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/communism-family.htm>
3. First published in the collection *Love of Worker Bees* (Moscow/Petrograd: State Publishers, 1923, cov. 1924), *Vasilisa Malygina* was republished as a stand-alone book in 1927 (*Vasilisa Malygina*. Moscow-Leningrad: GIZ, 1927). This was the edition translated as *Red Love* in the United States. It was not published in Russian again during the Soviet period.
4. Kollontai, "The New Woman" in *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, 51.
5. *Ibid.*, 53–54.
6. Alexandra Kollontai, *Love of Worker Bees*, trans. Cathy Porter (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1978), 155–56.
7. As quoted in Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995), 145.